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ABSTRACT

Based on the social cognitive perspective which assumes that children and teenagers internalize social values, this study focused on the psychological processes involved in the internalization of responsibility by young adolescents. The study examined whether preadolescents experienced social goals, ethical evaluations, and perceptions of efficacy in everyday situations involving responsibility, and whether these cognitions were correlated with responsible actions. The subjects were 106 ethnically diverse, middle-class fifth and sixth grade students. The students completed a survey in which they were asked to respond to four everyday responsibility situations which involved peer, family, and school settings. The students rated how much they would experience social cognitions in each situation. The social cognitions considered were: (1) social goals, such as caring for others and desire for social approval; (2) ethical evaluations which focused on personal values; and (3) efficacy evaluations of one's perceived ability to achieve objectives. The students also rated the likelihood of their engaging in responsible or irresponsible behavior. The correlation between the social cognitive variables and behavior ratings was assessed for each situation. Results revealed that multiple social cognitions are experienced by preadolescents in response to responsibility situations, which may indicate a correlation of conflict with both responsible and irresponsible behaviors. (BAC)

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Do Social Goals, Ethical Evaluations, and Perceptions of Efficacy Lead Preadolescents to Behave Responsibly?

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Statement of the Problem This research was designed to examine more closely the psychological processes involved in the internalization of responsibility by young adolescents. Several experiences shaped our orientation to this question. First, we chose to focus on early adolescence as a pivotal time in the development of internalization. In previous research, we observed that elementary school children talked about responsibility with an external focus--they were concerned with rules and standards set up by parents and teachers and the degree to which their behavior was monitored and the standards enforced. Teenagers, in contrast, had a stronger internal focus--they were more concerned with what behavior said about them as a person, their own beliefs about right and wrong. Although they were able to reflect on external standards and monitoring, it was not what defined responsibility for them. Early adolescent children seemed to be in between--they realized that external rules and standards could be interpreted in several different ways--in other words, they were not so black and white, but had large grey areas that could be personally defined. However, for the most part they did not have strong criteria (values) for making those decisions in personally meaningful ways. They were very much involved in situational ethics: what worked at the time. So our focus because this period of development, and the kinds of evaluations young people made about situations involving responsibility The second area of

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influence was my work as a juvenile probation officer in which I frequently asked young people "why" they broke the law. I never had a young person tell me because I wanted to break the law, or I wanted to be bad. Their illegal and irresponsible actions were almost always at the service of some basic goals. They wanted to get money to fix up their car, buy something for their girl friend or impress their buddies. So, we felt our research should examine the kinds of goals that were directing irresponsible and responsible behaviors. Finally, we observed that the internalization of responsibility was a gradual process that occurred as the result of the accummulated experience young people have with responsibility in everyday situations. Therefore, we focused our research not on big responsibility issues, but small, everyday ones--and examined the psychological workings of young people in the contexts of their lives at school, with friends and in the context of the family.

Our approach is also consistent with the dominant social cognitive perspective in the relatively slight literature on the development of responsibility. The social cognitive approach assumes that children and teenagers internalize social values and with development increasingly rely on cognitive mechanisms to govern responsibility. Social cognitive constructs such as social goals, ethical evaluations, and perceptions of efficacy typify the processes by which young people to come to self-regulate responsible behavior. In this study we first examined whether preadolescents experienced social goals, ethical evaluations and perceptions of efficacy in everyday situations involving responsibility. Then we further explored whether these cognitions were correlated with responsible actions.

Subjects and Procedure Subjects were 106 ethnically diverse, middle-class 5-6th grade students. About 42% Southeast Asian, 25% Hispanic, 25% Anglo, 9% African American, with a mean age of 11 years. As part of a larger research

study, students completed a paper-pencil survey in their classroom. The survey asked them to respond to several everyday responsibility situations. The situations were generated from previous research with preadolescents and in consultation with teachers. The situations involved both peer, family, and school settings for responsibility:

(1) a classmate wants to copy your homework;

(2) you have lost a library book;

(3) a friend asks you to tell another's secret, and

(4) a classmate invites you over after school without adult supervision.

Subjects rated how much they would experience a variety of social cognitions in each situation on a four point scale (0="not at all", 3 = "a lot"). The social cognitions included a variety of (a) social goals such as caring for others, providing resources to others, desire for shared experiences, reciprocity, normative goals, and desire for social approval, (b) ethical evaluations focusing on personal values, such as not wanting to lie to parents, and (c) efficacy evaluations of one's perceived ability to achieve objectives.

Subjects also rated their likely behavior in each situation. They rated how likely would they engage in responsible and irresponsible behavior in the situations on a four point scale from "I would not do this," to "I would do this".

To assess whether students' social cognitions were associated with behavior, Pearson correlations were calculated between social cognitive variables and behavior ratings in each situation.

Results *Do preadolescents experience social goals, ethical evaluations and efficacy evaluations when making decisions involving social responsibility?* Preadolescents reported they experience social goals, ethical and efficacy evaluation in response to the four responsibility situations used in the study. Multiple cognitions were activated in response to the stimuli situations.

Respondents reported caring about others' needs, caring about personal needs, feeling guilt, shame, integrity, and wanting to be trusted. They struggled with finding the means and strategies for carrying out their social goals and values. The findings of the study support the notion that a variety of types of social cognitions are activated when young people are faced with decisions involving responsibility.

Do Social goals, ethical evaluations and perceptions of efficacy lead preadolescents to behave responsible? Not necessarily. The findings portrayed in Tables 1-4 indicate that preadolescent students experienced a heterogeneous set of social goals, some of which were linked to responsible behaviors, some with irresponsible behaviors. For example, in the **"copying homework" situation**, "I want to help my classmate" and "I don't want my classmate to get upset" were correlated with the irresponsible choice, whereas "I'm worried my classmate is not learning" was correlated with the responsible choice. We see in this situation an example of the common phenomenon in which social objectives, such as caring for others, can promote both irresponsible as well as responsible behaviors. Because we can be motivated by multiple (and contrasting) goals simultaneously, there must be some way to differentiate among and prioritize these goals. In this situations, the ethical evaluation "I am ashamed of being dishonest" is correlated with the irresponsible choice, indicating that the ethical evaluation occurred *in response to* the irresponsibility rather than prior to the choice. If the sense of shame had occurred prior to the behavior choice, we would expect it to be more strongly related to the responsible option. Preadolescents' evaluations of their social skills, in this case their ability to tell the classmate "no," was also an important cognitive component of responsible decision making. Those students who felt

less able to refuse a classmate's request were more likely to report that they would allow their homework to be copied.

The other situations in this study showed similar patterns of complex, multi-faceted cognitions involved in the responsibility decisions of preadolescents. In the **"lost library book"** situation concern for mother promoted the responsible choice, as did a feeling of guilt. Note in this decision, the emotional component seems to be an anticipatory cognition which supported responsibility. In regards to efficacy perceptions, we again see that a perceived skill deficit is correlated to behavioral choices. Students who saw stealing as the only way to solve their dilemma were more likely to steal; those who were able to generate other possible solutions were less likely to steal.

In the **"telling a friend's secret"** situation, social goals of concern for others' feelings promoted responsibility, while desire to be like everyone else promoted irresponsibility. The ethical evaluation of wanting to align behavior with values, "if I say I will keep a secret, it's important ot me to keep my word" promoted responsibility. Again, this appears to be an anticipatory cognition. Efficacy evaluations related to perceived social skills were not related to behavioral choices.

The pattern of relationships between cognitive variables and behavior were most complex in the **"going to a friend's house after school situation."** The desire to have fun predicted irresponsible behavior and was negatively correlated with responsibility. However, students least likely to go to the friends house against parents' rules also worried about being invited to visit in the future. Interesting, although wanting to earn parents' trust was not correlated with responsibility, not wanting to lie to parents predicted responsible behavior choices. Students who wanted to be truthful to parents were more likely to tell friend they couldn't go to their home without an adult present.

Efficacy evaluations were similarly involved. Students who felt they were old enough to be alone with friends were more likely to behave irresponsibly. Conversely, students concerned about telling friends "no" were more likely to behave responsibly nonetheless.

Conclusions *Do preadolescents experience social goals, ethical and efficacy evaluations in situations involving responsibility?* Yes. Preadolescents experienced a heterogeneous set of social goals, ethical and efficacy evaluations in response to responsibility situations. *Were social cognitions related to responsible behaviors?* Often, but not always. Reported cognitions were often conflicting, and were correlated with both responsible and irresponsible behaviors. The data suggest that when students have multiple *and conflicting* social goals in responsibility situations, ethical and efficacy evaluations may serve a regulatory function through which preadolescents invest in one goal over others in order to make behavioral choices. These results indicate that the internalization of responsibility involves the selective coordination of multiple types of social cognitions rather than the simple activation of social goals and evaluative processes.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE CORRELATES OF PREADOLESCENTS' BEHAVIORAL CHOICES IN SITUATIONS INVOLVING RESPONSIBILITY

"Copying Homework"

	Behavioral Choices	
	Irresponsible Choice	Responsible Choice
Cognitive Correlates	Allow classmate to copy homework.	Refuse to share homework, but offer to study together.
Social Goals		
I want to help my classmate.	.2570 **	n.s.
I don't want my classmate to get upset.	.2568 *	n.s.
I'm worried my classmate is not learning.	n.s.	.3119 **
Ethical Evaluation		
I am ashamed that we are being dishonest.	.2644 *	n.s.
Efficacy Evaluation		
I'm not sure how to tell my classmate I don't like anybody copying my homework.	.2396 *	n.s.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE CORRELATES OF PREADOLESCENTS' BEHAVIORAL CHOICES IN SITUATIONS INVOLVING RESPONSIBILITY

"Lost Library Book"

	Behavioral Choices	
	Irresponsible Choice	Responsible Choice
Cognitive Correlates	Take the money and pay it back later.	Offer to do extra chores to pay for the book.
Social Goals		
Other students may need to use this book.	n.s.	n.s.
I worry that my mother might need the money.	n.s.	.3330 **
My friends might tease me if they find out I lost a library book.	n.s.	n.s.
Ethical Evaluation		
I feel guilty about taking the money.	n.s.	.4214 **
Efficacy Evaluation		
Taking the money seems like the only way to solve the problem.	.3454 **	-.2267 *

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

SOCIAL COGNITIVE CORRELATES OF PREADOLESCENTS' BEHAVIORAL CHOICES IN SITUATIONS INVOLVING RESPONSIBILITY

"Telling A Friend's Secret"

	Behavioral Choices	
	Irresponsible Choice	Responsible Choice
Cognitive Correlates	Tell the secret, and make friend promise not to tell anyone else	Tell my friend I won't tell the secret.
Social Goals		
I'm afraid if I tell my best friend the secret will be out.	n.s.	.2608 **
I wouldn't want someone to tell my secrets.	n.s.	n.s.
Everyone tells secrets.	.2639 **	n.s.
Ethical Evaluation		
If I say I will keep a secret, it's important to me to keep my word.	n.s.	.2995 **
Efficacy Evaluation		
I don't know how to tell my best friend I can't tell the secret.	n.s.	n.s.

SOCIAL COGNITIVE CORRELATES OF PREADOLESCENTS' BEHAVIORAL CHOICES IN SITUATIONS INVOLVING RESPONSIBILITY

"Going To A Friend's House After School"

	Behavioral Choices	
	Irresponsible Choice	Responsible Choice
Cognitive Correlates	Go to my friend's house.	Tell friend I can't go if there's not an adult home.
Social Goals		
My friend might not invite me again.	n.s.	.2079 *
We'll have fun at my friend's house.	.5577 **	-.3947 **
I want my parents to trust me.	n.s.	n.s.
Ethical Evaluation		
I don't want to lie to my parents.	n.s.	.2818 **
Efficacy Evaluation		
I'm old enough to be alone with my friends.	.3645 **	n.s.
I'm not sure how to say I don't want to disobey my parents.	n.s.	.2637 **

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$